

UNTIL CHRIST IS FORMED IN YOU

Galatians 4:8-31

Key Verse: 4:19

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ...

The churches in Galatia were pioneered by Paul. He was the first one who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Galatian believers. Paul was their shepherd. So Paul's heart was broken when he learned that their faith was wavering because of the bad influences and false teachings of the Judaizers. In this letter, he calls the Galatians "my dear children" (19) and "my brothers" (3:15; 5:13). He had a loving relationship with them. And on the basis of their relationship, Paul admonished them to come back to their senses. As we study this passage, let us think about how Paul's teachings apply to us today.

First, you did not know God (8-11). Look at verses 8-9a. *Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?* What was the Galatians' spiritual condition before knowing God through Jesus Christ? Paul reminded them that they had been slaves to worthless man-made idols. When Paul and Barnabas visited the Galatian city of Lystra in their first missionary journey, he healed a crippled man who was lame from birth. When people saw what he had done, they shouted, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes and they tried to offer sacrifices to them. They did not know God. Instead, they worshiped the gods of Greek mythology. Paul told them to turn from the worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them (Ac 14:8-20).

When people do not know God, they tend to worship worthless things. The ancient Egyptians worshiped the sun. The Romans worshiped their own mythological figures. There are thousands of household gods in Japan. Some Koreans in the ancient times bowed down before big old trees in their villages. People in our society also worship all kinds of idols such as money, fame, power, and Hollywood celebrities. Romans 1 teaches us that we became the objects of God's wrath as we exchanged the glory of the immortal God for worthless man-made images (Ro 1:18-25). Many people who claim to be independent from God worship something or someone as their gods. They are slaves to false gods, to their own passions or to material things. Likewise the Galatians had lived miserable lives subject to their sinful passions and feelings of guilt. Paul summarizes this spiritual condition in Ephesians 2: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph 2:1-3).

Then something amazing happened. God sent his one and only Son Jesus to rescue us. The Son of God came to live with us to reveal who the Creator God is. He taught us about the kingdom of God. He rebuked the nature to show us the power of God. He healed the sick and cared for the needy. Above all, he gave his life on the cross, to show us how much God loves us. By believing in Jesus, we became sons and daughters of God with all the blessings and privileges as his children. We now know God and he knows us. We love him and serve him out of love (1Co 8:3).

Look at verses 9-11. *But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.* St. Paul expressed his agony as a shepherd here. The Galatians, those who Jesus had redeemed with his blood, were turning back to the “weak and miserable principles,” that is, the Jewish legalism. They were in danger of enslaving themselves all over again. Paul’s heart was broken for them. They had joyfully accepted Jesus when Paul preached the gospel to them. But now they were turning their attention to religious rituals and thereby turning away from the grace of Jesus. Observing special days, months, seasons and years occupied their hearts and the cross of Jesus was becoming a secondary importance to them.

We are also in danger of falling into this trap. Observing special days and months, going through religious rituals, or following certain religious traditions provide comfort to people and fulfill some psychological needs for us. So some people seek to do things like lighting a candle in a cathedral, reciting prayers with rosary beads, wearing some religious ornaments, doing yoga meditations, and so on, rather than seek a personal relationship with God. However, we know that observances of religious rites cannot substitute our inward experience through the Holy Spirit.

Second, what has happened to your joy? (12-16). Look at verse 12. *I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong.* Paul pleaded with them to become like him for he had become like them. His plea was based on their love relationship in Christ. Personally I would be reluctant to say, “Become like me” because of my shortcomings and failures. I would rather say, “Be like Jesus.” But Paul told them to be like him. It wasn’t because Paul was a proud man. It was because he knew that they needed an example from a peer. Paul did not say simply, “Have faith in God.” He knew that they needed a concrete example to emulate. He also said to the Corinthians, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1Co 11:1). Paul was telling them not to be like his former self, a hardcore Jewish legalist, but what he was now, a shepherd.

When Paul first came to Galatians, he didn’t come as an evangelist with impressive rabbinical credentials. He had been a zealous Jew. He was far ahead of his fellow Jews in his zeal for the Jewish traditions. But God changed him 180. God set him free from the Jewish legalism. In Christ, he found true life, joy and peace. He set aside the barriers between Jews and Gentiles in order to bring the gospel of Jesus to

Galatians. This is what he said, “Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ... When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings” (1Co 9:19,22,23; NLT).

In fact, Galatians appreciated Paul’s humble servanthip. Look at verses 13-16. Paul says that he first preached the gospel to Galatians because of an illness. We don’t know what kind of illness he had. Some people speculate that it was an eye problem because of the references in this letter (15; 6:11). Verse 14 says that his illness was repulsive or revolting. So some people say that he probably had an illness such as epilepsy or malaria. Whatever illness he had, the point was that the Galatian believers welcomed him as their shepherd in Christ. They were changed by the gospel of Christ. They had joy to be with Paul. Even the grumpiest person began to run around with a big smile on his face as the love of Christ touched his heart. Jesus became the true source of joy and hope in their lives. But when they fell into legalism, their joy disappeared. They were unhappy because they could not always satisfy the strict demands of the laws. They felt a little better when they found others falling short of the law and criticized them. But the deep joy in their hearts was gone. So Paul asks in verse 15, “What has happened to all your joy?”

One thing that differentiates the life in Christ from the life in legalism is the joy we have in Christ. It is a deep joy in our hearts, not some temporary elation in our emotions. This kind of joy comes from knowing the Savior personally and serving him with love. Only Jesus can give us this joy. Before the tax collector Levi met Jesus personally, he had no joy. Unlike his countrymen in poverty, he lived an affluent life with his lucrative job. He thought he would be happy with all his money. But he was not happy with his selfish and sinful life. So one day while everyone in his village went out to listen to Jesus, Levi was sitting in his tax collector’s booth, hating his selfish and lonely life. But Jesus did not ignore him. He called him saying “Follow me.” This was the moment at which Levi’s life was turned around. He immediately got up and decided to follow Jesus. Not only that, he was so joyful that he invited Jesus and all his friends and threw a huge dinner party. The party was full of joy because of Levi’s repentance and new life through Jesus. They ate a lot and laughed a lot. But there were people who were unhappy to see them happy. Some Pharisees came and criticized them saying, “How come you guys are eating a lot while we are fasting according to the law?” Jesus answered them that they did not have to fast and make artificially serious faces as long as they were with the Savior. How can you suppress the joy arising from your heart--the joy that Jesus gives? When Paul asked the question to the Galatians, “What has happened to all your joy?” he was reminding them of their first love for Jesus.



Third, until Christ is formed in you (17-20). Look at verses 17-18. *Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you.* There was one thing in common between Paul and the Judaizers. They both were zealous to win the Galatians over. But their motives were totally different. Paul was zealous to win them over to Christ. The Jewish legalists were zealous to win them over for no good purpose. They wanted to snatch away the believers from the gospel to make them be on their side. This is a mark of false teachers.

Let us read verses 19-20. *My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!* Paul called the Galatian believers “My dear children.” He expressed his heartfelt concern for them. Paul felt pains when he thought about them. It was his labor of love for them. He really wanted them to be built up in their faith until Christ was formed in them. Paul was not satisfied with their outward changes. Circumcision was not enough. Baptism was not enough. Church attendance was not enough. He wanted them to be changed in their inner persons to have the heart of Christ. He wanted them to follow the footsteps of our Lord Jesus.

Paul says that his painful labor of prayer for them was like the labor pains of a woman in childbirth. Paul went through many life-threatening situations and sufferings to preach the gospel of Jesus to them. He shepherded them as if they were his own children. But now they were being snatched away by the false teachers. As a caring mother would scold her children, Paul had to endure the pain of rebuking them through the letter. It was painful for him to write them a letter of reproach. He said, “How I wish I could be with you now and change my tone.”

As we try to help young people of our time with the gospel, we often feel like going through labor pains. When we see them harden their hearts and become proud before God, we feel pains in our hearts. Sometimes we just want to give up. But Paul’s allegory of labor pains to a shepherd’s sufferings is appropriate because, in the end, the joy will transcend all the pains. It also takes time to be rooted in the word of God and built in Christ (Col 2:6). It takes time for Christ to be formed in a person’s heart and life. It does not happen overnight. So Paul did not give up. He had a “never give up” spirit. Paul and Barnabas returned to Galatia later to strengthen and encourage the disciples to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” they told them (Ac 14:22). When we see our Bible students repent their sins and decide to follow Christ, we taste the true joy. Let’s pray that we may have compassion for young people of our time and patiently help them with the word of God. Let’s pray that God may give us patience and the shepherd heart of Jesus until Christ is formed in us and in our Bible students.



Fourth, we are the children of the promise (21-31). In the last part of Chapter 4, Paul uses an allegory to help us to understand the difference between being slave and free. *Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise* (22-23). These women represent two covenants. Hagar, the slave woman, represents those who are enslaved by law (Judaizers) in the present city of Jerusalem as the center of Judaism. Sarah, the free woman, represents those who are free from the law. Sarah is our spiritual mother and represents the Jerusalem that is above.

Ishmael was born in the ordinary way by the slave woman. He was the product of Abraham's compromise. On the other hand, Isaac was born according to God's promise. Those who believe in Christ based on God's promise are Abraham's true descendants. This is according to God's promise, not on efforts or labor, much like a barren woman given many children without labor pains (27). Paul concludes in verse 28. *Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.*

Isaac was born because of God's promise. It happened even though it was biologically impossible for Sarah to have a baby. She was past her menopause and there was no artificial insemination available then. Likewise, we have been saved from our sin and death by God's promise. It was impossible for us to observe all the laws. We couldn't do anything to save ourselves. We are set free not because of our work but because of our faith in Jesus, based on God's promise. We are not under the law, but we are bound to God by a new covenant in Jesus' blood. And we are citizens of the New Jerusalem that is above and free, the Heavenly City of God.

Look at verse 29. *At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.* Just as Ishmael persecuted Little Isaac, the Judaizers were persecuting the Gentile believers. Those who insist on Christians going through religious rituals can be compared to Ishmael who persecuted Isaac. What must be our attitude toward these false teachings? Look at verses 30-31. *But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.* Just as Abraham had to get rid of the slave woman and her son, we must cast them out of our minds and ignore them. We must hold on to Christ only and follow his ways.

In today's passage, Paul reminded us that we are in danger of falling into legalistic way of life. We are tempted to follow the ways of this world rather than the way of the cross. Paul felt pains when he saw his Bible students abandon the gospel and turn back to the weak and miserable principles. He told them that the goal of his ministry was to help them to grow in faith until Christ is formed in them. This is our goal as well in our life of mission. May God help us to love Jesus and have the joy of knowing him personally and serving him freely!